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PREPARATIONS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT ON THE BASIS OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 44/228 AND TAKING INTO ACCOUNT OTHER RELEVANT GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS: CROSS-SECTORAL ISSUES

ENVIRONMENTALLY SOUND MANAGEMENT OF TOXIC CHEMICALS

(Section II, Chapter 11 of Agenda 21)

Recommendations of the Meeting of experts to discuss draft proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for chemical risk assessment and management

(London, 16-19 December 1991)

A. Introduction

1. In decision 16/35 adopted at its sixteenth session, the UNEP Governing Council took note of decision 2/17 of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, in which the Preparatory Committee invited "the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO), within the framework of the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and other relevant organizations, to report on ongoing work carried out through appropriate governmental expert meetings concerning possible proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for risk assessment and management of chemicals".

2. The Governing Council also requested the Executive Director to prepare, in cooperation with the secretariat of the Conference, WHO, ILO, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the European Economic Community (EEC) and other relevant organizations, draft proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for risk assessment and management of chemicals.

3. It further requested the Executive Director to convene, in consultation with the Directors General of the ILO and WHO, within the context of the collaboration under the IPCS and in cooperation with the OECD, EEC, and the Secretary-General of the Conference and other relevant international organizations, a meeting of government-designated experts to consider the draft proposals and, in consultation with the Executive Heads of ILO and WHO and through the appropriate channels, to submit a report on the outcome of the meeting to the Preparatory Committee at its fourth session.

4. The Meeting took place in London, from 16 to 19 December 1991, at the invitation of the United Kingdom Department of Health. It was attended by 95 government-designated experts from 71 countries among which 43 were developing countries, as well as by representatives of 13 international intergovernmental and 11 non-governmental organizations.

B. Recommendations

Proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for chemical risk assessment and management 1/ to be submitted to the Preparatory Committee

5. The Meeting took note of:

(a) General Assembly resolution 44/228 on the convening of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and the affirmation that the environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals is among the areas of major concern in maintaining the quality of the Earth's environment and especially in achieving environmentally sound and sustainable development in all countries, and should be addressed by the Preparatory Committee;

(b) UNEP Governing Council decision 16/35, which took note of decision 2/17 of the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development inviting WHO, UNEP and ILO, within the framework of the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), in cooperation with FAO and other relevant organizations, to report on ongoing work carried out through appropriate governmental expert meetings concerning possible proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for risk assessment and management of chemicals and, inter alia, requested the Executive Director to prepare draft proposals for an intergovernmental mechanism for risk assessment and management of chemicals (UNEP/IPCS/IMCRAM/exp/3/Rev.1) and to convene a meeting of government-designated experts to consider those proposals.

6. The Meeting agreed that the environmentally sound management of chemicals is vital to sustainable development. The Meeting noted and endorsed the five

priority areas proposed by the Preparatory Committee as components of an international strategy, namely:

(a) Expanding and accelerating the international assessment of chemical risks;

(b) Harmonization of classification and labelling of chemicals;

(c) Information exchange on toxic chemicals and chemical risks;

(d) Establishment of risk reduction programmes;

(e) Strengthening the national capabilities and capacities for management of chemicals.

7. The Meeting also noted that these priority areas were not exhaustive in respect of the areas for an international strategy required to bring about an improved system for environmentally sound management of chemicals.

8. In considering options to implement such a strategy, the Meeting agreed with the views expressed at sessions of the Preparatory Committee that:

(a) Increased collaboration and cooperation among programmes should be encouraged with gaps closed and duplication avoided;

(b) Best use of the capabilities of existing institutions should be encouraged, and the creation of new agencies avoided.

9. To implement the concept of an intergovernmental mechanism, the Meeting strongly endorsed the need for an enhanced role for the IPCS, increased coordination among United Nations organizations and an intergovernmental forum on chemical risk assessment and management to promote environmentally sound management of chemicals. The purpose of the forum is to provide policy guidance, develop strategies in a coordinated and integrated manner, provide the required political support and foster understanding of the issues by Governments. The Meeting took the view that the work of the forum would be facilitated if national Governments were to examine their own systems and nominate focal points.

Objectives

10. The objectives of the forum would be to:

(a) Develop and recommend concerted international strategies for chemical risk assessment and management in all countries, particularly taking into account the special needs of developing countries;

(b) Identify priorities for work, and assist in securing the collaboration, through Governments, of national and regional institutions to work with the international programmes;

(c) Strengthen national capabilities and capacities for chemicals management, especially in relation to training, education and provision of information;

(d) Periodically review and evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing activities to implement the international strategy and make recommendations concerning them;

(e) Assist Governments to carry out work on chemical safety, promote the coordination of such activities among Governments and non-governmental organizations, and encourage the appropriate distribution of work among organizations within and outside the United Nations system in as simple, clear and logical a way as possible;

(f) Provide a forum to contribute to the development of principles for protection of health and the environment from chemicals.

Enhanced role for the IPCS

11. The Meeting regards it as essential that the role of the IPCS be expanded and upgraded to bring about successful implementation of the strategies for chemical risk assessment and management required to achieve the goals of Agenda 21. In particular, the Meeting believes that the mandate of the IPCS should be extended to include explicitly the coordination of risk assessment and risk management activities of international organizations in the United Nations system and the role of IPCS in support of the intergovernmental forum. Recognizing the importance of the OECD Chemicals Programme, the IPCS should be empowered to strengthen agreements with that programme so as to allow full use of the work of OECD by the wider international community. The Meeting noted the range of organizations in the United Nations system with roles relevant to chemical risk assessment and management which also may need to be strengthened. It strongly recommends that the UNCED Preparatory Committee should invite FAO and other relevant United Nations bodies including those engaged in the transport sector, as well as OECD, to cooperate in the IPCS.

12. In implementing the expanded role of the IPCS, the Executive Heads of the participating organizations should be advised by an intergovernmental committee drawn from the proposed intergovernmental forum. At the same time, it is of paramount importance that the scientific integrity of the current activities of the IPCS be maintained. The active participation of national scientific bodies should be continued and expanded and scientific advisory meetings be convened on a periodic basis to ensure this.

Activities

13. Activities to be undertaken as part of the international strategy could include, but not be limited to:

(a) The setting of priorities for an expanded programme of risk assessment of chemicals;

(b) In collaboration with industry and other interested parties, discussion of the principles to be adopted in international codes of conduct for the management of, and trade in, chemicals;

(c) Promotion of information exchange, scientific and technical cooperation and technology transfer, including human resource training and education, in order to strengthen national and regional capabilities to manage chemicals in an environmentally sound manner;

(d) Promotion of international agreements on harmonized classification and labelling of chemicals, with particular emphasis on the development of standardized hazard communication and symbols to be used in the labelling of chemicals;

(e) Providing advice to member States on:

(i) The methodology and application of chemical risk evaluations and other scientific information in national programmes to manage risks from chemicals;

(ii) Risk reduction measures;

(iii) Information systems on chemicals;

(iv) Preparedness for, and response to, chemical emergencies;

(v) The issues, including the regulatory framework, involved in the import and export of banned or severely restricted chemicals and inappropriate technology;

(vi) Prevention and treatment of poisoning;

(f) Identification of gaps in scientific knowledge essential for meaningful risk assessment and management;

(g) Promotion and follow-up of international and regional agreements and other arrangements respecting the import and export, production, distribution, storage, use, and disposal of chemicals (both man-made and of natural origin) so that these activities are not detrimental to human health and the environment;

(h) Promotion of risk communication to improve the public's understanding of the risks and benefits arising from the use of chemicals and how chemicals can safely be used.

Structure

14. The intergovernmental mechanism should consist of:

(a) A forum of States Members of the United Nations with the participation of:

(i) Relevant United Nations organizations;

(ii) The Chemicals Programme of the OECD;

(iii) Organizations representing regional geographic, political or economic groupings of countries, as appropriate;

(iv) Appropriate non-governmental organizations concerned with workers' interests, the environment, consumers and industry;

(b) A committee comprising the chair of the forum and members elected by the forum to provide guidance to the collaborating organizations in the IPCS and to carry out the business of the forum between meetings;

(c) The cooperating organizations in the expanded IPCS.

15. Representatives of member States of the forum and committee should be high-level representatives familiar with the range of chemical issues at a policy level within Governments. It is expected that the forum would meet at intervals of approximately three to five years and consideration should be given to it reporting to the General Assembly.

Implementation

16. If these proposals are approved at the Conference, it is suggested that the Executive Heads of WHO, ILO, and UNEP convene a conference of interested Governments within one year, which would constitute the first meeting of the forum and would discuss the terms of reference, the reporting and operating procedures, funding needs and sources and participation by organizations. Meanwhile, the IPCS should be given: (a) the responsibility and resources for providing an interim secretariat for the appropriate follow-up actions agreed at the Conference; and (b) the appropriate status within the United Nations system, in particular within WHO, in order to implement its role with the necessary authority.

Notes

1/ In discussing chemical risk assessment and management, the Meeting bore in mind that these terms should be taken as covering the full range of activities relevant to ensuring the safe use of chemicals and that the term "toxic" referred both to acute and chronic harmful effects of chemicals.